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THE VIOLENT WORLD: A BIBLICAL RESPONSE

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Abstract

In a world that is getting increasingly violent, our inquiry is into the notion of violence in the Bible and the biblical responses that we can take recourse to in understanding and dealing with the religious, cultural and ethnic violence that is confronted on a daily basis, especially in a diverse country like India. Browsing through the pages of the Bible, we see that the early history of the people of Israel was violent to a great extent. They suffered great violence and inflicted similar violence on others in the process of conquering and protecting a kingdom. The world-wide violence can only be seen as a reflection of what is seen in human nature portrayed in the Bible, where violent practices like *ḥāmas and ḥērem* pose a challenge to the believer. However, the perspectives of the Prophets and the Psalmist on violence is less radical. From a biblical perspective, in this respect, Israel comes of age in Jesus as the New Testament adopts a more pacific approach to non-Israelite religions. In the teachings of Jesus, we find an antidote to the delusions of a violent God of the Old Testament as the moral evolution that was inaugurated by the prophets culminates in Jesus. What we see in the Bible is a progressive divine portrait, which is complete only in a God on the Cross. Jesus is the answer to the violent delusions of the world.

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1. Introduction

On 14 February 2019, a convoy of vehicles carrying a group of security personnel was attacked on the Jammu-Srinagar National Highway at Lethpora in the Pulwama district, Jammu and Kashmir. According to the reports, the security personnel were attacked by a vehicle-borne Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) suicide bomber. The attack resulted in the deaths of 40 Central Reserve Police Force personnel and the attacker. People have performed violent acts in the name of religion. Holy wars throughout history have generally been fought by people thinking, "my religion is true and yours is not, and therefore, I have the God-given right to exterminate you. God is on our side."

The early history of the people of Israel was violent to a great extent. They suffered great violence and inflicted similar violence on others in the process of conquering and protecting a kingdom. The violent prayers made in some of the Psalms stand as mute witness not only to the violence that was meted out to them by their enemies, but also of the violent desire for vengeance they harboured and believed that God would execute it on their behalf because they were powerless at the time (Ps 137:9). Such were the times and such was the understanding of ethics. Jesus sums up the violent history of the people of Israel when he refers to the violent death of the prophets: "so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar" (Mt 23:35).

The Indian epic of *Mahabharata* has Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, distressed at the prospect of fighting his kinsmen to establish his family's ownership of a *kingdom*.[1] Krishna counsels him, and the dialogue forms a meditation on various aspects of life itself. As far as violence is concerned, perhaps the central question is to be found in *Bhagavad Gita* (BG) 1:37: "What happiness could we ever enjoy, if we killed our own kinsmen in battle?" According to the literalistic interpretation, Krishna's answer is: "fight," and Krishna gives the following reasons in BG 2:33-34: "Now, if you will not undertake this proper engagement thereupon, having avoided your own duty and glory, you shall incur evil. And also people will relate

[1]http://www.angelfire.com/sc3/makoze/religiouslit/litbhagavadgita.pdf

your undying infamy; and, for the honoured, disgrace is worse than dying" (BG 2:18). Later, in BG 2:38, Krishna is again direct, and commands Arjuna: "Join yourself to battle!" If one were to read it literally, it would appear that Gita believes that violence is necessary, at least in some instances.

Violence has been part of human history and most of the kingdoms of the world have been established on violence and destroyed in violence. The immediate background of this paper is the rising nationalism in India today. This is met with militant mobilizations as an authoritarian movement manifest throughout culture, polity, economy, religion and law, class and caste, which in turn, tend to alter views on gender, land and memory. The continuities between Hindutva and Hindu cultural dominance, the civic and despotic governmentalities imposing Hindu nationalism in public, domestic, and everyday life have become alarming. The concerted action against Christians and Muslims, Adivasis and Dalits, through spectacles, events, public executions, the riots in Kandhamal of December 2007 and August-September 2008 — the planned, methodical religio-politics of terror unfolds in its multiple registers. At the intersections of anthropology, religion and politics, critical questions of coexistence, nation making, cultural nationalism, and subaltern disenfranchisement are asked.

On a global level, in recent years, terrorist groups such as ISIL, Al-Qaida and Boko Haram have shaped the modern image of violent extremism and the debate about how to address this threat. Their message of religious, cultural, political and social intolerance has had drastic consequences for many regions of the world. Holding geographical territories and using social media for real-time communication of their atrocious crimes, they seek to challenge our shared values of peace, justice and human dignity.

One of the paradoxes is that on the global level, almost all these atrocious crimes are committed in the name of *God* (cf. Jn 16:2b). Down through the history, human beings have resorted to violence as an acceptable or even glorious means of shaping the world. Admit it or not, in some ways, violence is the foundation of civilization and comes instinctively to us human beings.

2. World-wide Violence

The year 2017 turned out to be an especially bloody year in the recent world history. Over the course of the year, eight huge terror attacks were executed, each with more than a 100 fatalities. Six of the eight deadliest attacks claimed the lives of nearly 1,500 people that

year in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Egypt and Somalia. These were planned, financed and carried out by the Taliban, ISIS or Al-Qaeda. According to the Global Terrorism Database of the University of Maryland, [2] in 2016, these organizations were responsible for approximately 70% of the world's terror victims.

The deadliest terror organizations in the world have not only to do with religions but they are also the wealthiest. In the modern times, there is a connection between the factors of religion, money and terror. The financial activity of terror organizations is critical, and its indispensability for terror attacks is like fuel for your vehicle. The annual income of Hizballah **(**Iran**)** is $1.1 billion; Taliban (Afghanistan): $800 million; Hamas (Gaza): $700 million; ISIS (Iraq): $200 million; Islamic Jihad (Palestine): $100 million; Lashkar-e-Taiba (Pakistan and Afghanistan): $75 million; The Real IRA (N. Ireland): $50 million.[3]

Christians have also been violent during their history. Violent events in the history of Christianity, such as the pogroms against the Jews, the Crusades, the Inquisition, heresy trials and some missionary movements show how pervasive the use of violence in the name of religion had become in the past. In the present world, we have The Army of God (USA), Eastern Lightning, a.k.a. the Church of the Almighty God (China), The Lord's Resistance Army (Uganda), The National Liberation Front of Tripura (India), The Phineas Priesthood (USA) and The Concerned Christians (USA) that are aggressively active in various degrees.

Christians who commit terrorist acts in the name of religion or backed by religion are, of course, Christian terrorists. This does not mean that Christianity is a violent religion, but we need to admit the fact that it has been complicit in horrific and systemic violence across history, from the Crusades and the Inquisition to the Nazis,[4] and today's Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis and IRA. It is absolutely critical that we do not overlook the Christian theological elements in such religiously inspired terrorism.

3. Early Israelite View on Violence

Looking for the root of the inspiration for Christian violence, we go back to its roots in the Bible. Violence among the early Israelites is

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[2]https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/ access 16.03.2-19.

[3]Itai Zehorai, "The Richest Terror Organizations in the World", in *Forbes Israel*, Jan 24, 2018. See also Gil Feiler, *The Globalization of Terror Funding*, Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 74, Ramat Gan: The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies Bar-Ilan University, 2007.

[4]The Nazi ideologues often used Jn 8:44 to legitimize their stand against the Jews.

seen generally in the biblical descriptions of God or human beings killing, destroying, pillaging and doing physical harm. As an activity of the biblical God, violence has four expressions: (1) the results of divine judgment, such as God's destruction of "all flesh" in the flood story (Gen 6:13) or God raining fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24-25). (2) God's prescription for and approval of wars such as the conquest of Canaan (Josh 1-12). (3) God's harsh and vindictive dealing with non-Israelites (Ex 12:29-32; Nahum and Obadiah). 4. God lashing out against rebellious Israelites (Ex 32:25-29, 35; Josh 7).

The divine violence of the unchristian God has presented an ethical dilemma to Christians at least since the 2nd century AD. Marcion of Sinope at Rome around the year 144, led a movement to reject the *violent and unchristian God of Israel* found in the Hebrew Bible. The movement was noticeable enough that key Church Fathers like Irenaeus and Tertullian had to intervene to condemn and suppress the move.[5]

3.1. Violent Acts and Religious Zeal

Some scholars attribute the Israelite accounts of the destructive acts of God to the brutality of the society that produced it, and they believe that modern people are able to see the matter more clearly. They find support for this view in the apparent acceptance of cruel practices of war by Old Testament authors (Num 21:1-3; Judg 1:4-7; 1 Sam 15).[6] A similar problem is the violent acts prompted by the religious zeal. Phinehas (Num 25), Elijah (1 Kings 18:39-40; 2 Kings 1) and Elisha (2 Kings 2:23-25; 9) killed, ordered killing, or participated in killing in order to purify the faith and religious practices of the Israelites. Nevertheless, most texts that contain problems like this also contain complementary or self-corrective passages that give another perspective. The complexity of the biblical material with regard to violence and the right understanding to the broad plan of God makes it possible to argue that the Old Testament opposes violence and that the ultimate goal, and divine intention, is peace.[7]

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[5]F.A. Sullivan, "Marcionism," in J.A. Komonchak et al., ed., *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Bangalore: TPI, 1993, 623-624.

[6]Within this way of reading is also a feminist critique that sees in the Old Testament, a general disregard for women, illustrated by some passages that present sexual abuse as well as general subordination of women to men with no explicit judgment on such atrocities (Judg 19; Ezek 16, 23).

[7]For example, Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, 232, referring to the concern of Yahweh for Nineveh, notes: "The plot of the

3.2. Violence and Hebrew *Ḥāmas*

As part of the activity of God and of God's chosen people presented in the Bible, violence has theological consequences. However, the Hebrew word חָמָס[8] which is translated as "violence," refers almost exclusively to human action and therefore sets violence outside the activity of God. It also denotes rebellion against God that results in bloodshed and disorder and a general undoing of God's intentions for creation. Violence intrudes on God's world, and God acts destructively to counteract human violence. In Gen 6:11-13 human violence ruined the earth and thus prompted God to cause the flood as a corrective measure. This understanding presses a distinction between divine judgment and human violence.

3.3. Ḥāmas as Wanton Destruction

חָמָס also connotes that action, which is motivated by arrogance, selfishness or vindictiveness. Gen 49:5 employs the word in its description of the activities of Simeon and Levi, saying that "weapons of violence are their swords... in their anger they killed men, and at their whim they hamstrung oxen." חָמָס in this passage connotes wanton destruction. The passage suggests that some weapons and use of weapons might be legitimate, perhaps to defend the innocent or to right a wrong. However, in the story, Simeon and Levi, act only to satisfy a thirst for wrath (Gen 49:7).

3.4. Ḥāmas as Defiance of the Sovereignty of God

The use of the term חָמָס in some texts of the Bible suggest that "violence" is that which defies or ignores the sovereignty of God and the intentions of God for the world.[9] This is human violence of will against the will of God. Such an understanding appears in passages like Psalm 73:6, which identifies the wicked as violent, "pride is their

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whole concerns YHWH's resolve to save Nineveh if Nineveh will repent. It is important to recognize that "Nineveh" — the hated imperial city of the hated Assyrian Empire — has here become a cipher for all foreign nations who have abused Israel but who nonetheless fall under the aegis of YHWH's governance. Thus the narrative of Jonah appeals to the genre of Oracles against the Nations as we have just seen in the book of Obadiah and as we will see in the hate-song of the book of Nahum against Nineveh. The narrative of Jonah, however, instead of responding polemically against Nineveh as do most of the examples of the genre of Oracles against the Nations, portrays YHWH as ready to rescue Nineveh, that is, to save it (Jonah 3)."

[8]Note that Hamas is also an Islamic Resistance Movement founded to liberate Palestine, including the modern-day Israel, from Israeli occupation and to establish an Islamic state in the area that is now Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

[9]Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1: *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, translated by D.M.G. Stalker, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 157.

necklace; violence covers them like a garment." These are people who deny God's demand for justice by saying: "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" (Ps 73:11). In the subtlest scheme, even the disharmony between the divine and the human will caused by human beings is a violence.

3.5. Ḥāmas as a Cry to God in the Face of Injustice

חָמָס sometimes appears as a cry to God in the face of injustice (Jer 6:7).[10] Ex 23:1 and Deut 19:16 characterize a false witness as עֵד חָמָס (a "violent witness"). The notion that a false witness threatens life and well-being of the neighbour appears in a fuller form in many of the prayers in the people of God. Psalms 27:12 and 35:11 specifically include חָמָס to describe false accusations. In these instances, the psalmist petitions God to act as judge to set the situation right.

3.6. Ḥāmas as Oppression by Foreign Powers

חָמָס also refers to oppression by foreign powers. This use of the word is consistent with other uses in which the nations hostile to the people of God are arrogant and these self-acclaimed powers act contrary to the purposes of God. Habakkuk portrays the Babylonians marching to battle with complete disregard for God's work in the world. They come "for violence" (Hab 1:9) with the attitude that "their justice and dignity proceed from themselves" (1:7). That is, the Babylonians act as though they are self-created, responsible to no one but themselves (cf. Isa 60:18).

4. Warfare, Conquest and the Ban

Warfare appears frequently in the Old Testament and represents a special category of violence. The account of Israel's conquest of Canaan and the order to put residents of the land under the ban (to "utterly destroy" them) raise ethical questions like those raised by modern colonial conquests and ethnic cleansing (Deut 7:1-11, 20:10-18; Josh 1-12). However, although we need to allow the mythical and legendary dimensions of many of these passages, a close reading is crucial for understanding this part of the Bible.

4.1. Ethical Challenge of Ḥērem

The greatest ethical challenge arises from the Old Testament presentation of the ban and the violence that it implies. The practice entailed the complete annihilation of the enemy along with all the

[10] See H.J. Stoebe, "חָמָס - ḥāmas, violence," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, translated by Mark Biddle (3 vols.), Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997, vol. 1, 437-439.

enemy's possessions that might otherwise be captured as spoils of victory. The verb הָרַם connotes this practice ("utterly destroy" as in Deut 7:2), and חֵרֶם the noun that derives from it refers to persons or objects "set apart for destruction" (Deut 7:26). Such persons or objects were designated as sacrificial gifts to God in exchange for God's help in securing victory in battle. Thus, חֵרֶם identifies "devoted things" that the Israelites were not to touch or possess (Josh 7:2). This practice is attested outside the Bible in the record of king Mesha of Moab on the Moabite Stone,[11] a 9th century BC monument of victory.[12] It seems certain that the Israelites practiced the ban as their neighbours did (Num 21:1-3).

4.2. Ḥērem, a Symbol of Pure Religious Devotion

The notion of חֵרֶם in the conquest story seems to be a symbol of pure religious devotion and not an actual record of killing people or an incentive to do so. One sign of the symbolic character of the ban is its appearance in Deut 7:2, in which Moses presents the ban as a precondition for Israel to occupy the land. Deut 7:3-5, however, explains what חֵרֶם means in two stipulations, neither of which involves taking life. The first stipulation is a statement against intermarriage (vv. 3-4), and the second stipulation is to destroy the sacred objects of the residents of Canaan (v. 5). Thus the ban in Deuteronomy seems to be "a metaphor for religious fidelity" that does not involve the taking of life.[13]

This is confirmed by the fact that the conquest story presents some Canaanites who not only are preserved, but who are presented as models of faith as well. Two prominent groups of Canaanites are said to have survived the Israelite attack and continued to live in Israel's midst after the conquest: Rahab the Canaanite and those in her house (Josh 2, 6:17), and the Gibeonites (Josh 9-10). The very presence of these two groups illustrates further that the ban in Joshua is not something that was actually carried out according to the strict rules laid out in Deut 7:1-5 and 20:10-20.[14]

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[11]https://christiananswers.net/q-abr/abr-a019.html access 17.03.2019.

[12]Lauren A.S. Monroe, "Israelite, Moabite and Sabaean War- Ḥērem Traditions and the Forging of National Identity: Reconsidering the Sabaean Text RES 3945 in Light of Biblical and Moabite Evidence," in *Vetus Testamentum* 57, 3 (2007) 335.

[13] Walter Moberly, "Toward an Interpretation of the Shema," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honour of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathyn Greene-McCreight, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999, 135.

[14]Norbert Lohfink, "ḥāram," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, translated by David E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 197.

The Israelite legislation in Deuteronomy was not indiscriminately violent after all. For example, in the context of a battle, it prohibits cutting down fruit trees during a siege (Deut 20:19-20). Such wanton destruction, which was a regular part of Assyrian sieges of cities, was not to be part of Israel's warfare.[15] However, the Israelite law codes also legislate proper treatment of female captives by demanding compassion and respect (Deut 21:10-14). Laws like these probably reflect Israel's own internal dialogue over how to wage war, either in comparison to the neighbouring people who committed acts of cruelty or as correctives to Israel's own brutal tactics (Num 31:18). The various connotations of חֵרֶם beginning with a total destruction to the compassionate treatment of the prisoners of war could also be seen as a part of Israel's ethical evolution.[16]

4.3. Literary and Historical Factors

Violent as the practice of חֵרֶם might be, there are literary and historical factors that provide the context and in some cases mitigate the impact of biblical accounts of חֵרֶם. Unlike the picture presented by the biblical accounts, archaeological evidence clearly indicates that the Israelites had only a limited control of the land of Canaan early in their history as a nation. Their domain was limited to the hill country, the least fertile and desirable areas, until much later.[17] In this case, Joshua 1-12 does not reflect what Joshua's army in the desert in the late Bronze Age (1550-1200 BC) actually accomplished, but the story is idealized from a later perspective. The story of Israel's sweeping conquest of Canaan was not told by people who conquered the land of the Canaanites.[18] Rather, the story emerged from efforts to create an identity in that land for the people of God, who in the last stages of telling the story themselves had no land. As such, the story urges

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[15]See Jacob L. Wright, "Warfare and Wanton Destruction: A Re-examination of Deuteronomy 20:19-20 in Relation to Ancient Siegecraft," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, 3 (2008) 423-458.

[16]Jer 7:5-7 demands amendments in the Israelite ways asks them not to "oppress the alien," whereas Ezek 47:22 leaves provisions for an inheritance for the aliens who reside among Israel and have begotten children among them. And the Lord demands through Zech 7:9-10 to render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to the alien.

[17]Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000-586 B.C.E.* (2d ed.), New York: Doubleday, 1992, 329-338.

[18]Consider the three-stage development of the story. There is the narrative time of the conquest, the real time of Josiah and the exile. The story was written down, for the first time, likely in the 7th century BC, during the reign of king Josiah. Josiah sponsored the writing of the first draft of the history in order to support his religious and political reforms, which focused mainly on purifying worship and limiting the cult to the Jerusalem temple. The story took final form while Israel was in exile in Babylon.

reliance on God, not on military action.[19] However, the later generation, when they were in power, idealized something that was dangerous!

5. The Changing Prophetic View

In a more evolved Israel, the prophets looked at violence differently. As products of the time and the society, the Hebrew prophets engaged the problem of violence in a variety of ways that must be sorted out in order to gain an adequate picture of these complex figures. According to some narratives, the former prophets like Samuel, Elijah and Elisha were involved in planning, supporting and carrying out warfare and other violent acts. Elijah and Elisha were radical devotees of Yahweh who tried to purify Israel of the worship of other gods. They appear in the narratives of 1-2 Kings, not in the context of war, but of false gods and false worship.[20] The figures of Elijah and Elisha raise the problem of zealous religious commitment that prompted the devotees to violence.[21]

1 Kings 18 and 2 Kings 10 present a wide range of actions by Elijah and Elisha, all of which involve the death of those who opposed them. Elijah participated in the overthrow of Ahab with his prophecy of Ahab's violent death (1 Kings 21:19). He also predicted a similar fate for Ahab's wife Jezebel (1 Kings 21:23-24). In Elijah's last act, just before ascending to heaven, he called down fire from heaven on representatives from king Ahaziah, who succeeded Ahab (2 Kings 1). Similarly, Elisha stimulated violent rebellion against the ruling house in Israel by supporting the bloody revolt of Jehu. During this event Jezebel was thrown from her window and dogs ate her, as Elijah had earlier predicted (2 Kings 9:30-37). Perhaps the most shocking act of Elisha, however, appears in the story in 2 Kings 2:23-25. As he walked toward Bethel, some boys taunted him by calling him "baldhead" (v. 23). Elisha cursed them, and two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys!

Elijah and Elisha operated on the assumption that wars and political revolts were instruments God used to work out God's judgment. The idea was that God used war as a legal judgment to

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[19]Millard C. Lind, "The Concept of Political Power in Ancient Israel," in *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 7 (1970) 4–24.

[20]Phinehas, the fiery priest who stamped out the worship of other deities by killing the devotees of those gods (Num 25:1-9).

[21]Pseudo-Philo 48.1 identifies Phinehas with Elijah. See Louis H. Feldman, "The Portrayal of Phinehas by Philo, Pseudo-Philo, and Josephus," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 92, 3/4 (Jan-Apr, 2002) 315-345.

settle disputes between parties or between nations.[22] This is confirmed by Elisha's predictions of the cruel acts of Hazael, the Syrian king for the larger purpose of punishing Israel for its sins: "Because I know the evil that you will do to the people of Israel; you will set their fortresses on fire, you will kill their young men with the sword, dash in pieces their little ones, and rip up their pregnant women" (2 Kings 8:12). The Assyrian and Babylonian conquest of Israel and Judah were interpreted by some of the exilic prophets in this light.

The identity of both Elijah and Elisha as "the man of God" is crucial for the understanding of their role in violence and destruction. This label identifies them as people who possessed the power of the holy over life and death. On the positive side, Elijah and Elisha used their power as holy men to preserve the lives of poor widows, and they could bring the dead back to life (1 Kings 17:8-16; 2 Kings 4:1-7, 13:14-21). Nevertheless, as Rudolf Otto notes, God (the numinous) is at once terrifying and fascinating (*tremendum et fascinans*), the stories of their destructive actions illustrate that contact with the holy could be dangerous, and a holy man had to be approached carefully.[23] Hence, the brief account of the boys who taunted Elisha illustrates what happens to those who bother a holy man. Such stories, although baffling, are lessons intended to instruct readers on this matter.

5.1. The Subversive Prophetic Move

The later generations of the Jewish people, with an evolved state of consciousness, do not treat stories of prophets like Elijah and Elisha uncritically. Hosea directly rejected Jehu's bloody coup, which Elisha had supported. The objection to Jehu's action comes through the symbolic name of Hosea's first child. "Name him Jezreel, for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel" (Hos 1:4). The latter prophets highlight in their oracles the problem of

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[22]Robert M. Good, "The Just War in Ancient Israel," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, 3 (1985) 387.

[23]Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational,* John W. Harvey, trans., London: Oxford University Press, 1923, 12-13, notes: The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its "profane," non-religious mood of everyday experience... It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of — whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *Mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures."

violence in its many forms as actions against the purpose of God. Amos railed against those who "trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth" (2:7) and Nahum condemns Assyria for its cruelty in war (3:1-4).

Sometimes, the violent prophetic response is just prayers. In response to the violent acts of foreign nations, the prophets used rhetoric that seems to encourage or promote violence. This is particularly true in the so-called oracles against foreign nations found in some of the major prophets (Isa 13-23; Jer 46-51; Ezek 25-32).

5.2. Nahum and his Avenging God

The oracles of Nahum are directed against the oppressing nations. Nahum speaks like the oracles against foreign nations and thus is a prime example of a prayer for avenging justice. Nahum proclaims God's destruction of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Made prominent by Assyrian king Sennacherib (701 BC), Nineveh represented a major military power, which threatened Judah and destroyed Israel in 722 BC. Nahum's message thus presents God's vengeance against Nineveh as a response to the violence of the Assyrians. Nahum 1:2-11 begins the proclamation against Nineveh by describing God as "jealous" (קַנָּא) and "avenging" (נקם - v. 2). קַנָּא refers to God's desire for absolute devotion and the emotional violence felt within a person who is denied such a devotion (Ex 20:5; Josh 24:19). נקם refers to justice meted out by a legal authority (Ps 94:1). In this case, the devotion that justly should have come to God is denied and so, a legal action is symbolically initiated.

However, following these statements about God's wrath, three statements qualify the notion that God is an angry avenger. (1) v. 3 puts God's anger in perspective with a reference: "The Lord is slow to anger" (Ex 34:6). (2) Nah 1:7 makes a positive declaration about God's character that clarifies who God defends with divine wrath: "The Lord is good...; he protects those who take refuge in him." (3) In a rhetorical question, v. 9 presents the main flaw of Nineveh: "Why do you plot against the Lord?" Assyria is presented clearly as a powerful and oppressive nation that disregards God's intentions.

Nahum 3:1 then sums up Nineveh's blatant rejection of God's vision of peace: "Ah! City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty — no end to the plunder." The verses that follow describe further how Assyria conquered, plundered, and terrorized nations like Judah. The killing was so rampant that there were "piles of dead, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end — they stumble over the

bodies!" (3:3).[24] For this reason the book of Nahum ends with a rhetorical question to Nineveh: "Who has ever escaped your endless cruelty?" (3:19).

Nahum, however, declares that any empire that relies on violence will eventually meet the wrath of the Great Judge who "protects those who take refuge in him" (Nah 1:7). In a similar manner, God's mercy appears at the end of Micah who refers to God's forgiveness of Judah (7:18-20). The varying claims about God's wrath and mercy are in tension with each other. The final form of the material in Nahum suggests a theology of divine mercy, both for Israel and its enemies, though this mercy has limits because of God's commitment to justice.[25]

6. The Psalmist's Violent Prayer

Like the Prophets, the Psalms display violence both in descriptions of actions by powerful oppressors and in the speech of those who call on God to bring vengeance on the oppressors. The Psalter identifies the victims of violence as the righteous (צַדִּיקִים), a term that denotes helplessness, humility and dependence on God (Ps 34:20-23). The perpetrators of violence are the wicked (רְשָׁעִים), who are always opposed to the righteous (Ps 1:4-6). Psalm 10 contains a litany of descriptions of how the wicked oppress the righteous: "They sit in ambush in the villages; in hiding places they murder the innocent" (v. 8a); "They seize the poor and drag them off in their net" (10:9b); "They stoop, they crouch, and the helpless fall by their might" (10:10). The various battles and their aftermath are depicted in these prayers.

As a response to the violence of the wicked, numerous psalms make a plea to God to bring vengeance. The language of these petitions is extreme (Ps 109:17-19, 20) or even offensive (Ps 137:8). However, two features of such prayers provide context that makes

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[24]Othmar Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, translated by Timothy J. Hallet, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997, 102, 394. The Assyrians have produced artwork depicting their military exploits that suggests that this depiction of Nahum is historically accurate. In a relief discovered in the palace of Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 BC), they show their soldiers attacking a city while residents of the city are impaled around its perimeter and bodies piled at the base of the wall, with more combatants falling from the ramparts above.

[25]See Mark S. Gignilliat, "Who is a God Like You? Refracting the One God in Jonah, Micah and Nahum," in *Monotheism in Late Prophetic and Early Apocalyptic Literature: Studies of the Sofja Kovalevskaja Research Group on Early Jewish Monotheism*, Vol. III, Nathan MacDonald and Ken Brown, ed., Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014, 70-71.

them more understandable. First, the main aim of the prayers for vengeance is for God to act as judge over the world (Ps 94:1-3) to protect the helpless ones who suffer at the hands of bloodthirsty enemies (Ps 59:2-6). Hence, the request for "vengeance" is a request for legal protection, not revenge.[26] Second, the petitions for vengeance in the Psalms are not prayers for the psalmist to be empowered to respond to enemies. The psalmist is powerless and so prays for God's help because man has failed to protect him (Ps 11:1-2).

In several psalms, the king appears as one who counteracts violence and oppression by defending the poor (Ps 72). But numerous psalms include boasts by the king and ascription of actions to him that suggest punitive, military action. The king reports in Ps 2:9 that God empowered him against the nations to "break them with a rod of iron" and "smash them into pieces like a potter's vessel." In Ps 18:43 the king says concerning the enemy: "I beat them fine, like dust before the wind" (Ps 18:42).

The Psalms are also the product of the time. This violent rhetoric in the Psalms is consistent with the self-portrayal of kings in the ancient Near East and images that enhance that portrayal.[27] The book of Psalms increasingly describes Israel's king as a victim of violence rather than its perpetrator. This shift is likely due to the experience of Babylonian captivity (587-539 BC), when Israel lost its monarchy. By the end of the Psalter the king is devoid of royal power, he is poor and needy and has become a model of dependence on God.[28]

7. The Coming of Age in Jesus

From a turbulent portrait of first-century Palestine, Jesus emerges as the catalyst of nonviolent social revolution that was the harbinger of the renewal of Israel. This fascinating narrative opens up a new perspective of the Roman-dominated Jewish Palestine of the time, viewing it as an "imperial situation" in which individual acts of violence were responses to institutionalized repression and injustice. Unlike the fiercely nationalistic Zealots, Jesus is presented as the sober prophet of nonviolence. In the proclamation of the kingdom of God, Jesus aimed at catalysing the renewal of the people of Israel,

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[26] Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, Linda M. Maloney (trans), Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, 70-71.

[27] Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 291-306.

[28] See Patrick D. Miller Jr., "The Psalter as a Book of Theology," in Patrick D. Miller Jr., *The Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004, 214–225.

calling them to loving cooperation amid difficult circumstances of debt and despair and to organized resistance to the violence of an imperial situation brought about by Rome.

7.1. The Pacific View of the New Testament

The altered view on violence seen in the Prophets is taken a step further in the New Testament era. Name-calling is a common type of violence in the New Testament. In response to the unbelief of the Jews, the gospel authors told stories of Jesus attacking them in his teaching. In Mt 23:4-36 Jesus derides the Pharisees as the vilest of hypocrites. In Jn 8:44, Jesus calls "the Jews" the "children of the devil." While Jews are commonly the target of such name-calling, polytheists are also attacked. For example, Paul dismisses the entire population of Crete as "liars, vicious brutes and lazy gluttons." (Tit 1:12). How to reconcile these violent references in the general irenic context of the New Testament?

The New Testament texts often reflect, rather than challenge, the violent household and political structures of the ancient world. Jesus tells parables in which beatings and even killings of household slaves are affirmed as disciplinary measures (Lk 12:45-47). Revelation's pages burst with gruesome scenes of cosmic battles, plagues, and bloodshed. Consider, for instance, the birds who gorge on human flesh at God's banquet (Rev 19:17-21). Luke's parable of the nobleman's return, meant to represent the second coming of Jesus, has the nobleman's demand for his enemies to be brought forward and slaughtered right before him (Lk 19:27). Such violent images of final judgement owe to an increasing preoccupation with the afterlife, which was something of little concern to the earlier Israelites in the Old Testament era.

7.2. Biblical Violence and Jesus

Eve's first son murdered his younger brother, and humanity has been fighting ever since. Many of the Israelite believers in God, both kings and former prophets, led ferocious armies. In the life of the later prophets, the scene was more pacific. Jesus used a whip made out of cords to cleanse the temple. Beyond that, Jesus rejected aggressive warfare and violence. As Jesus was being arrested, Peter, one of his companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. But Jesus said to him: "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Mt 26:50-54). Jesus allows for no violence, and his followers who have done otherwise, during the Crusades, the

Inquisition, heresy trials and aggressive missionary movements, were confused, misled and were wrong.

7.3. Jesus, Antidote to the Delusions of a Violent God

Any cursory reader of the Bible can see two opposing divine portraits in the scripture: a violent God of wrath slaughtering his enemies and his own people who are obedient and commanding his people to do the same, and a compassionate God in Jesus who says that his Father is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, and he loves his enemies and commands us to do the same (Mt 5:43-48). Since the beginnings of Christian theology, people have recognized this tension between the violent portraits of God and the pacifistic revelation of God in Christ.

This leads some people to take recourse to a dichotomous view of God breeding self-righteousness and fear. They use whatever portrait of God they can find in the scripture to excuse whatever kind of violent and unloving attitude they have against other people whom they hate or disagree with. They condemn others who have a different theological view as heretics. History bears witness to the fact that the Bible has been used to excuse and promote slavery, war, genocide, torture, vengeance, capital punishment and the superiority complex of a *chosen* people. The reality is that all of this *can* be found in the Bible. And yet, these things are the opposite of all that Jesus stood for and taught. We try to see these views not as contradictory. We have created a fusion dance of theology to merge the image of violence with the image of peace. We try to see it not as *contradiction*, but as a *paradox* and *mystery* instead. The sum total of what Jesus taught is painted in what he repeatedly called the Kingdom of God, which has always faced and existential tension between the 'already' and 'not-yet'.

7.4. Biblical Anthropology and Theology

Violence in the Bible is a human problem. It is a case study in primitive ethics and human violence, which were projected onto "the gods" throughout history, the biblical God included among them.[29] The Bible shows how the Spirit of God is at work within our

[29]The Enuma Elish, the Mesopotamian creation epic, composed probably in the eighteenth century BC tells the story of god Enki (Ea) who kills god Apsu and from his remains, Enki creates his home. Tiamat is enraged that Enki has killed her mate. With god Quingu as her champion, Tiamat summons the forces of chaos and creates eleven horrible monsters to destroy Enki and other gods. In the ensuing battle, Marduk defeats Quingu and kills Tiamat by splitting her in two. Out of her corpse, Marduk creates the heavens and the earth and binds Tiamat's eleven creatures to his

messy societal evolution, as he progressively leads us out of our delusions regarding God and into his full revelation in Christ. The Bible reveals that God's love is big enough to allow humanity's violent projections, as he works with us where we are in order to bring us into a higher revelation of truth and love. In spite of all the primitive human expressions of violence, the progressive anthropology of the Bible inspires the most powerful visions of compassion, social justice, kindness, peace-making and love of enemies.

Our ethics is based first and foremost in Christ who stands at the apex of human evolution as the exact imprint of God's very being (Heb 1:3). We meet Jesus in the Bible, but on this matter Brennan Manning hit the nail on the head: "For many Christians, the Bible is not a pointer to God but God himself. In a word – bibliolatry. God cannot be confined to a leather-bound book. The four Gospels are the key to knowing Jesus. But conversely, Jesus is the key to knowing the meaning of the gospel — and of the Bible as a whole."[30] This is an invitation to walk with Jesus who, perhaps in the last two thousand years, has gone far ahead of us.

8. Evolution: Old Testament to Jesus

When we easily dismiss and rationalize away the radical, counter-cultural teachings of Christ by quoting random Old Testament texts, we are not followers of Jesus. We are, rather followers of whatever conflicting but suitable images we can find in the scripture. In this scheme of Christian life, we might follow the instruction of Jesus on the "love your enemy" if someone overtakes us on the wrong side in traffic, but if someone physically threatens us, it is time to take our pick from the assortment of examples of retribution in the Old Testament or the apocalyptic symbolism from the book of Revelation! By doing this, we are able to create a God exactly in our own image by choosing whatever image of God fits what we need for the moment. As Brian Zahnd so aptly notes, we have done this throughout our Christian history:

> Even if we restrict our inquiry into the nature of God to the Bible, we are likely to find just the kind of God that we want to find. If we want a God of peace, he is there. If we want a God of war, he is there. If we want a compassionate God, he is there. If we want a vindictive God, he is there. If we want an egalitarian God, he is there. If we want an ethnocentric God, he is there. If we want a God

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feet as trophies. See http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Enuma_Elish, access 17.03.2019.

[30]*Brennan Manning, The Signature of Jesus, Oregon: Multnoma Publishers, 1996, 174-175.*

> demanding blood sacrifice, he is there. If we want a God abolishing blood sacrifice, he is there. Sometimes the Bible is like a Rorschach test — it reveals more about the reader than the eternal I AM.[31]

The words of many Israelite authors over a few hundred years and their revisions within a religious tradition, which we, in Jesus' own words, call "the law and the prophets" by no means present a single view of God. There is a progressive understanding going on, evolving and perfecting the understanding of the divine. Some of the later writings critique earlier writings, and later prophets critique earlier prophets. Just as we see a progression and evolution of ideas and awareness throughout the human history, so too we see a progression in the Israelite understanding of God exemplified in the huge and surprising difference between the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels and that of the Fourth Gospel that came about just in a matter of about thirty years!

9. The Progressive Divine Portrait

Indeed, in 1 Sam 15:3, God commanded his people to kill the conquered; all of them — men, women, children, and babies and to show them no mercy (cf. Deut 7:2), whereas the same God (cf. Jn 1:1; 14) commanded his people in Lk 6 to love their enemies, to be merciful as their heavenly Father is merciful. In so doing, they would be like their Father, who is kind to the wicked." Here we have juxtaposed two biblical images of God. The former is an image of God in the Bible from hundreds of years before Jesus and the latter is the words of Jesus himself. On account of this black and white contrast, can we throw out the former in favour of the latter, as Marcion wanted to do in the 2nd century? No. Instead, we need to listen to the second voice of the scripture, which represents an ever-progressing understanding of God's unconditional love with which he pleads the cause of the victim and censures violence.

This is the kind of the refinement of understanding that we see generally also in other religions. For example, on the issue of violence in the Gita that was referred to in the beginning of our reflection, some of the spiritual 'extremists' use the idea that one's life continues beyond the earthly one, as a justification for violence. If the body

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[31]*Brian Zahnd, "Foreword," in Brad Jersak, A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel, Pasadena, CA: Plain Truth Ministries, 2015, xiii-xvi, at xiii.* The Rorschach test is a psychological test in which subjects' perceptions of inkblots are recorded and then analysed using psychological interpretation, complex algorithms, or both. Some psychologists use this test to examine a person's personality characteristics and emotional functioning.

does not matter, then any violence done to the body ought not matter either. This is most apparent in BG 2:26-30. "For the born, death is certain, for the dead there is certainly birth. Therefore, for this, inevitable in consequence, you should not mourn" (2:27). Likewise, BG 18:17 says: "He whose state of mind is not egoistic, whose intelligence is not befouled, even though he slays these people, does not slay and is not bound (by his actions)." [32] O'Connell acknowledges that other interpretive traditions of the BG agree that "violence in some cases or at some times has been obligatory" even if at a perfunctory level.[33]

In the history of the biblical Israel, the law of Moses helped humanity progress out of the law of the jungle according to which, the primal, survivalist and powerful humanity bent on conquest, subjugated and oppressed the weak. As Israel progressed, we see the prophets giving a voice to the oppressed and speaking on their behalf. We see mercy and justice gaining greater focus. Increasingly, we see the vision of a tribal God who demands sacrifices fading and we see the emerging vision of a God who "desires mercy and not sacrifice" — a notion that was so dear to Jesus that he quoted it twice. He is a God who loves the nations and desires to be a father to all peoples, just as Abraham had envisioned in the beginning.

In a similar vein, taking a more refined step, Gandhi gives a spiritualistic interpretation of the episode of Arjuna's predicament and Krishna's command. Given Gandhi's doctrine of non-violence, he reconciles the violence advocated in the *Gita* where Krishna recommends that Arjuna fight his relatives in war with his own non-violent position. In an altered consciousness brought about by the passage of time and the refinement of religious understanding, Gandhi says that the war of Arjuna against his relatives is meant to symbolize the war within each of us against those elements of our minds that we are intimately attached to. They are ultimately detrimental to the performance of our sacred duty, or somehow impede our understanding of the truth about all action.[34]

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[32]Eric Sharpe, *The Universal Gita*, La Salle: Open Court, 1985, 83-84, notes that such passages were used to support violent means to overthrow British imperialism.

[33]Joseph T. O'Connell, "Caitanya's Followers and the Bhagavad-Gita: A Case Study in Bhakti and the Secular," in Bardwell Smith ed., *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, Leiden: Brill, 1976, 33-52, 44.

[34]Gandhi notes that under the guise of physical warfare, Gita describes the duel that perpetually goes on in the human hearts, and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring. However, Ronald Duncan, ed., *Selected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, in https://www.questia.com/ library/7290274/selected-writings-of-mahatma-

As the scripture unfolds the story of the development of human understanding of God and how God works in the world, if one is looking for a solid biblical defence for slavery, genocide, war, polygamy, nationalism, sexism and racism, one can find all these in there. However, when one holds these things accountable to the image of God revealed in Christ, we find them falling short. Hence, first of all, we need to acknowledge these two views of God as wrestling with each other in the people of God and the writers of the scripture. Secondly, we need to recognize the culmination of the evolution of the understanding revealed in Christ.

10. A God on the Cross — Kenosis and Theosis

The primitive humanity, which was relatively violent in nature, was able to relate to a God who slays his enemies and commands his people to do so, but a God who dies on the cross for his enemies was incomprehensible to them. It is when he commands us to do the same in order to establish his Kingdom, that it becomes uncomfortable for us. The image of a God on the cross deconstructs all images of a violent God. In contrast to the warrior God, the crucified God hangs lifeless, bloody and marred, as a symbol to humanity, drawing out empathy, exposing victimization, condemning violence, demonstrating forgiveness, making peace, deconstructing false images of God and creating a new humanity of love with resurrection and life.

The Old Testament shows a keen awareness of violence as a problem in human society and among nations as they act cruelly to one another. However, claiming that violence is against God's intentions for the world, can we remove God from biblical violence? No. Instead of removing God from that violence, we can read the Old Testament stories as God reacting to the human violence with corrective measures. Sometimes God kills or destroys or uses human instruments to do so as a way of counteracting violence.[35] Acts of divine destruction, however, are not associated with cruelty or

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gandhi, accessed 11.11.2019, would note that even if the war situation in the Gita was meant to be symbolic, the religious and philosophical teaching of Gita evinces that there are times when violence is religiously justified, times when kshatriyas are called to exert force to defend society. If such force were never justified, there would not exist a divinely sanctioned class of people whose task it is to exert such force. In this way, Gandhi's position seems inconsistent with the Gita.

[35]Terence Fretheim, "'I was only a little angry': Divine Violence in the Prophets," *Interpretation* 58, 4 (2004) 365.

wanton destruction. God's ultimate purpose is for correction and redemption (Isa 19:1-25).[36]

This is an odd twist to the triumphant, glorious, militant *imago dei* of the old dispensation. The cross continuously shakes us out of our delusions to expand our awareness of its divine wisdom of self-emptying love and to partake in the divine nature. It lures and pushes us forward to become peacemakers and lay down our lives for one another, to grow into the true image of God, to be children of our Father. This is the kingdom of God in contrast to the petty transient kingdoms that we wage violent wars for. This is peace on earth and good will toward all.

Any law is a product of its time, and therefore reflects that time. In fact, its values were actually quite progressive for the day it was written. It served as a stepping stone. It increasingly sent the people on a trajectory towards a societal order that valued justice for all instead of survival of the fittest.

11. Conclusion

Violence is ingrained in the nature of human beings, and in the modern world, it has taken the shape of religious and ethnic intolerance. The past decade has witnessed a sharp increase in violent ethnic, sectarian or religious tensions. These range from Islamic extremists waging global jihad and power struggles between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the Middle East to the outbreaks of violence between Christians and Muslims across Africa and the very recent persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar. It is estimated that more than a quarter of the world's countries experienced hostilities motivated by religious hatred and mob violence related to religion, terrorism, and harassment of women for violating religious codes.

India is characterized by more ethnic and religious groups than most other countries of the world. With the presence of eight "major" religions, 2000-odd castes, 15-odd languages spoken in various dialects in 28 states and nine union territories, and a substantial number of tribes and sects spread all over India, the country has witnessed several religious and ethnic tensions some of which turned into violence in the past. A few centuries earlier, there was a European contribution to this violent picture. The Sephardic Jews living in Goa, many of whom had fled the Iberian Peninsula, located

[36] See Ulrich Berges and Bernd Obermayer, "Divine Violence in the Book of Isaiah," in *Monotheism in Late Prophetic and Early Apocalyptic Literature: Studies of the Sofja Kovalesvskaja Research Group on Early Jewish Monotheism*, Vol. III, ed. Nathan MacDonald and Ken Brown, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014, 9-10.

in the southwest corner of the European continent, to escape the excesses of the Spanish Inquisition to begin with, were also persecuted during the Goa Inquisition, which Voltaire describes as "contrary to humanity" in his letter of 15 December 1775.[37] It is reported that conversions to Christianity occurred by force and many Goan Hindus were massacred by the Portuguese between 1561 and 1774.[38]

In the modern times, four ethnic or religious conflicts have stuck the headlines: three occurred in the states of Assam, Punjab and Kashmir; a fourth and more widely known Hindu-Muslim conflict, continues to persist. The Assam problem is primarily ethnic, the Punjab problem is based on both religious and regional conflicts, the Kashmir problem is religio-political while the Hindu-Muslim problem is predominantly religious. To top the list, we have the presence of the Naxalites in the forest-belt that is stretching from Nepal to the heart of India, which in its birth was social in nature, but over time has assumed a political colouring. It is easier to outline these problems than to suggest what should be done about them. In a situation of mutual distrust, almost any solution will generate controversy. Still, a solution seems plausible.

Just as in the case of the racial evolution, ethical evolution takes place in a slow pace. Beginning with the law of Hammurabi, the Decalogue, the *lex talionis*, the corrective of Jesus regarding retribution and the love of the enemy, each debate is an expression of the work of the Spirit of God as he works with us where we are, with humanity's violent projections, in order to bring us into a higher revelation of truth and love. In this revelatory journey of humanity, some are faster than others. Some are ethically on a higher plane than others. However, it would be unjust to condemn others as they wobble and lag behind as they journey on an ethical plane because it was not so long ago that we were there. In anyone's journey, the ideal of the Kingdom of God inspires great vision of compassion, justice, kindness, peace and love, which together act as an antidote for the spiralling violence that has gripped some parts of God's world where we are mere guests for the moment.

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[37]Jean Sylvain Bailly, *Lettres Sur l'Origine Des Sciences, Et Sur Celle des Peuples de l'Asie, Address es M. de Voltaire Par M. Bailly, & Pr c d es de Quelques Lettres de M. de Voltaire l'Auteu*r, Paris: Gale Ecco, 2010.

[38]See António José Saraiva, *The Marrano Factory: The Portuguese Inquisition and Its New Christians, 1536–1765*, H.P. Salomon and I.S.D. Sassoon, trans., Leiden: Brill, 2001, 345–347.